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## <News> Conservation of Pan paniscus at the Southern Most Research Site

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**<NEWS>****Conservation of *Pan paniscus* at the Southern Most Research Site**

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The Lukuru Wildlife Research Project is responsible for scientific research, conservation, and education within the 23,908 km<sup>2</sup> area which corresponds to the administrative Zone Dekese, District Kasai, Province Kasai Occidental, Democratic Republic of Congo. The hilly terrain within the project area consists of predominantly irregular dry forest with blocks of grassland distributed in a mosaic habitat increasing in elevation out of the topographic Congo Basin. Primary research efforts focus on *Pan paniscus* "unit-groups" inhabiting the 4,107 k m<sup>2</sup> area between the Lukenie and Sankuru Rivers where at least five distinct, geographically separated bonobo unit-groups have been identified, although additional unit-groups inhabit the area. The identified unit-groups are locally known as the Bokindinda, Bososandja, Iteli, Longa, and

Luenga communities. There are approximately 400-600 individual bonobos within the primary research area. There are expanses of terrain between the unit-groups where bonobos do not range. Research findings within the Lukuru Project area have changed the perceived limits of bonobo distribution and ecological parameters by identifying that bonobos range into and exploit fleshy fruits in open, perennially dry grassland at the southern transition from forest block to savanna out of the trans-African forest vegetation belt. Although the bonobos require access to climax forest, project findings have also changed the established image of bonobos as specialized arboreal apes restricted to exclusively lowland moist forest.

As work continued in 1997-1998, we determined that ambitious action was required to sustain local bonobos in response to events which have occurred over recent years including changes in regional administrative doctrine under the new government and human demographic advances from the east. Arising from 1985 national legislation which empowered regional authorities to control hunting terms for each area, at a Zone meeting last year our local government repealed the regional protected status of bonobos and Thollon Red Colobus. Additionally, bonobos within our area continue to be disturbed by habitat modification, as a result of inefficient food production methods and the demand for domestic wood usage, by an increasing human population. They are also locally at risk as incidental catch in non-selective wire-snare traps and have been considered to be a special live-animal gift to honor government dignitaries. Throughout the geographic range of the species, bonobos continue to be victims of the illegal live animal trade.

In February of this year, the people at Yasa, the principal village between the Lukenie and Sankuru Rivers, established a permanent market, the first in the region. Village officials recruited Batetela traders, the ethnic group immediately to the east of our Project zone, to organize the commercial aspects of the market because of their reputation for having such expertise. The Batetela, known to consider bonobo meat a delicacy, have eliminated bonobos

from areas previously occupied within their ethnic territory. The southeastern geographic distribution limit for wild bonobo occupation corresponds to the presence of this human group. Further, by killing two adult bonobos, members of the Bakuba ethnic group attempted to develop a small-scale commercial route to move dried bonobo meat from the new market to the regional market in their ethnic territory, a three day walk southeast from our area.

Having depleted much of their own tropical timber resources, some Malaysian logging companies seem to have recently turned their demand for hardwood on the relatively remote forests within the topographic basin of Central Democratic Republic of Congo. To date the only timber extraction activity within the Project area and neighboring areas has been small-scale, selective, pit-sawing. However, in March of this year an international forestry consultant accompanied a Malaysian team of logging executives on a four day reconnaissance inspection of the Lukuru Project area. Lukuru Project team members met with the forestry group at that time. It has yet to be determined whether a concession will be sought within the Project area.

Last year we began to concentrate our habituation efforts within an area called Bososandja where we were able to observe, photograph, and video bonobos between November 1997 through May 1998. Although we have not provided provision for the study subjects, we constructed an observation blind alongside a perennial pool where we encountered the bonobos as they drank water and fed on submerged vegetation. Bonobos were seen to move bipedally through the pooled water over thick organic soil. Other observations occurred as we encounter bonobos in the grassland blocks and forest of the Bososandja.

Conservation education outreach campaigning throughout the greater Project area was coupled with several survey expeditions undertaken between December 1997 through April 1998. The presence or absence of bonobos was ascertained (these data are currently being analyzed for future publication). Project stickers were distributed to the human population and

eagerly displayed as a perpetual reminder to protect the bonobo.

Through a series of official meetings with the 21 member village council, we appealed to the local authority to reevaluate the conservation status of the bonobo. As a result of our efforts, in May of this year the regional government reinstituted protective status for bonobos, reinforced traditional taboos against consuming bonobo meat, and established a specific tract of land as a wildlife sanctuary. According to local traditional law, property rights for a block of 8,401 acres, corresponding to the range of the Bososandja bonobo unit-group, were acquired by the Project director which will permanently provide a sanctuary for all wildlife. Enforced by local civil authority, the sanctuary will be maintained with a prohibition against firearms, bows and arrows, nets, snare traps, fishing, and cutting for agriculture, fuel, building material, traditional medicines, or pit-sawyer timber extraction.

The Lukuru Wildlife Research Project will continue to practice conservation, education, and scientific research as the political and military situation within the country permits.